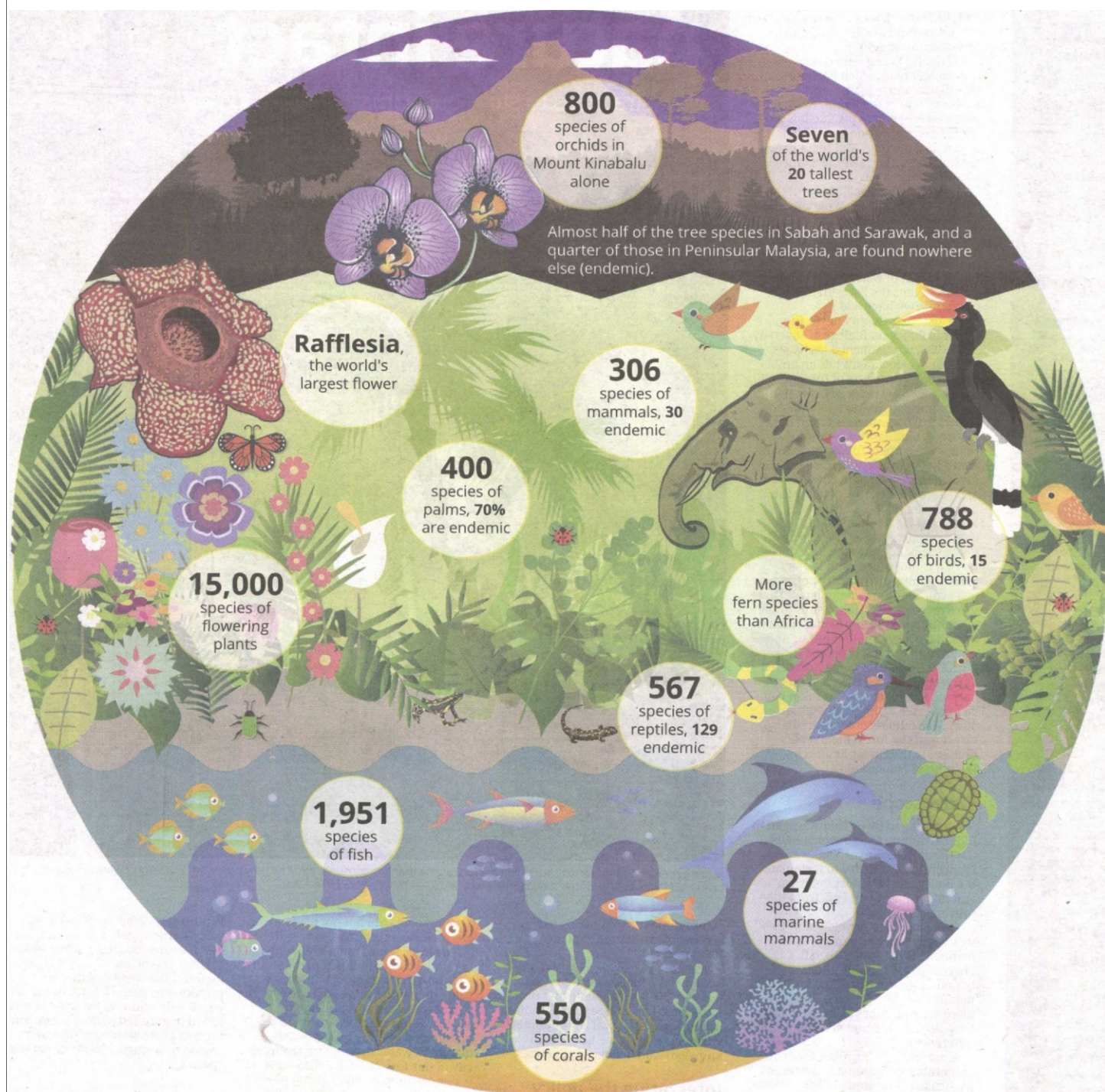


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# Preserve what we have

A new document outlines the way to safeguard our natural treasure trove. >2

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# Keeping nature intact

New strategies to stem our natural heritage losses.



**More greenery:** More forests are put aside for logging than for conservation. The new policy on biodiversity wants to raise protected lands to 20% of the total land area by 2025. — TAN CHENG LI/The Star

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**By TAN CHENG LI**

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OUR nature report card does not look good. In recent years, we've lost wild species – the Sumatran rhinoceros and the leatherback turtle are locally extinct as numbers are too small to be viable for breeding.

We're also losing wild spaces – a cave in Kelantan which harbours rare plants and a gecko found nowhere else in the world, will be quarried for cement production while seagrass meadows off Johor which host dugongs and seahorses, are buried under newly reclaimed islands.

Malaysia lauds itself as one of the world's 17 mega-diverse nations. Yet, alarmingly, it is ranked fifth among countries with the most number of threatened species in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List. (Australia tops the list with 821 species, while we have 534.)

Amidst such gloomy news, the National Policy on Biological Diversity 2016-2025, was launched last week. The 89-page document has an ambitious scope, consisting of five goals, 17 targets and 57 actions, to chart the way to protect our biodiversity – the rich and diverse species found in nature. It outlines the means to reduce pressure on biodiversity, safeguard key ecosystems and species, involve more people in conservation and share the benefits of using the natural wealth.

Botanist Dr Saw Leng Guan, who was a resource person for the drafting of the policy, says the new document has more focus and targets. "The previous biodiversity policy was just aspirations and statements. There were no reviews or follow-ups to see what has been done. The new policy must have a system to monitor and report, otherwise it is pointless."

The policy is also more structured and recommended the creation of various committees and a main council to oversee its implementation, adds Saw, who recently retired as director of the forest biodiversity division at the **Forest Research Institute of Malaysia**.

## Wider scope

According to Dr G. Balamurugan of ERE Consulting Group which helped the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry to formulate the policy, the new document has several major improvements from the previous one.

"The old policy, developed in 1998, was vague and had general statements. This policy has specifics. There are quantifiable and time-

bound targets which allow for better monitoring. And for each action, there are indicators to show what has been achieved. These are important differences."

Aside from giving more focus on vulnerable ecosystems and habitats, particularly limestone hills, wetlands, coral reefs and seagrass beds, the policy also addresses neglected concerns such as access to biodiversity sharing of its benefits, biosafety and invasive alien species.

Many indigenous people, local communities, civil society groups and private companies have been active in biodiversity conservation and their efforts should be recognised and supported. Based on the tagline, "Our shared heritage, our shared responsibility", the policy focuses on wider public participation of such groups to achieve the green goals. "It moves away from being a federal-government-centric policy to one that seeks to empower state governments, NGOs, the private sector and local

communities, to join hands in conserving biodiversity," explains Balamurugan.

The policy calls for a legislation on access and benefit sharing to be in place by 2017, to promote and protect traditional knowledge so that indigenous people and local communities will benefit from the use of their knowledge on biological resources.

## Integrating the policy

Worldwide Fund for Nature executive director Datuk Dr Dionysius Sharma is generally satisfied with the document. "The old policy was in fact very well-drafted and comprehensive. Unfortunately, it did not set timelines for its implementation, nor did it identify specific stakeholders who would be responsible for the implementation. This has been addressed in the new policy."

A strong point of the policy is its emphasis on mainstreaming biodiversity in development and decision-making processes. This is to ensure that all economic activities – be it agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism, mining or infrastructure

development – do not put pressure on our biological resources.

One indicator of mainstreaming is to establish a natural resource accounting programme that puts a value on natural areas and the ecosystem services they provide, says Sharma. "For example, it should be understood that the quantity and quality of water depends on the integ-

riety of our forests, which also serve as water catchments and natural filters. A natural resource accounting system will make this visible to decision-makers so that we grow our economies without destroying the very fundamental basis which they are based upon."

For this to happen, a regulatory framework to ensure that biodiversity is adequately valued and integrated into all decisions will be in place by 2018. The biodiversity component of the Environmental Impact Assessment process will be strengthened.

Saw gladly notes that the policy supports conservation of limestone hills. "They are a key habitat to protect, being disproportionately rich in species. They occupy only 0.4% of the country's land yet have 14% of

Peninsular Malaysia's 8,500 plant species. There should be a moratorium on quarrying by state governments."

However, he points out that many rare and threatened plants are not protected as present legislations safeguard only animals. Only the plants found in gazetted parks receive some form of protection. Saw says there should be a single law on threatened species.

## Keeping seas and forests well-stocked

The policy also wants "high conservation value" areas (HCV) and "environmentally sensitive areas" (ESA) to be mapped and incorporated into state and district local plans, so that they will not be mined or turned into plantations, townships or industrial sites. The policy bars forest plantations, including timber latex clone plantations, in HCV and ESA sites and in areas crucial for wildlife movement. In future, there will be guidelines and development controls for areas adjacent to these sites. The policy also encourages compact cities and urban growth boundaries to minimise urban sprawl.

To lessen the pressure of economic activities on species-rich areas, the policy calls for better planning of agriculture, sustainable management of all forests, more fishing-prohibited zones and a stop on over-fishing.

An over-looked area is the marine ecosystem. "The status and threats to terrestrial biodiversity have been well-studied and documented but not so for marine biodiversity," says Balamurugan. "Yet the threats here are a lot more serious. National fish stock surveys have not been done in recent years so we have no clue on

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the status of our fish stocks but various studies show severe depletion.”

To endure in the long term, our protected habitats have to be big enough, and have enough genetic and species diversity. So, the plan is to expand totally protected areas to 20% of the land and 10% of marine areas. Currently, only 1.4% of our over 453,000sqkm of waters are designated as marine parks.

In the plan are more corridors of natural habitats to connect these areas, to allow gene flow and animal movements. It is equally important to maintain biodiversity in urban areas by setting up adequate green spaces

## Realising the policy

With previous environmental policies hitting bumps on the road to realisation, it is difficult to be optimistic about this ambitious policy. How to prevent it from suffering the same fate as the previous policy, the Tiger Action Plan and the Elephant Action Plan?

“All policies will have some degree of this (non-implementation) because the element of accountability is not strong,” asserts Balamurugan. “As people say, ‘If we don’t implement, so what?’ The saving grace for the new policy is that it has targets which can be measured, and has a better governance structure. It identifies lead

agencies responsible for implementing the actions. It has a clear monitoring and co-ordination framework.”

He says a proposed national biodiversity roundtable led by the private sector and NGOs will provide for

greater public scrutiny on how the policy is acted on.

Ultimately, state governments will spearhead much of the action plan, so they must buy in to the whole idea of conserving biodiversity. There is conflicting agenda now – 80% to 90% of state revenues come from the use of land and exploitation of natural resources. The policy says states must be given options to diversify their revenue sources away from these resources. Other measures are removing perverse incentives (which encourages exploitation of the land) and incentives for states to have environment protection programmes.

To embed biodiversity conservation into development plans, state authorities – particularly agencies related to land use, agriculture, forestry and fisheries – must be trained. Balamurugan says the state economic planning units are supposed to develop state-level biodiversity strategies to carry out the policy recommendations.

## Who’s paying?

For the policy to get off the ground, funds are needed. The plan is to scale up the National

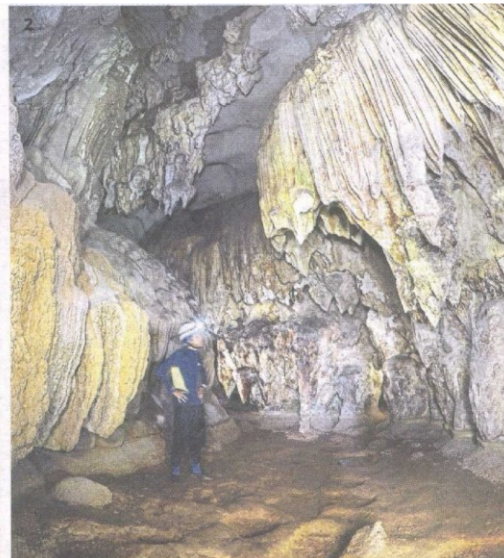
Conservation Trust Fund, established in 2014 with RM10mil from the federal government, by seeking funds from regional and international sources, and the private sector. The fund is to disburse RM2mil annually by

2020. Other proposals are new types of financing such as payment for ecosystem services (for supply of water and timber), green or carbon tax, and tourist departure tax.

For Sharma, there is a concern: Will increased trade pressure affect our ability to adhere to the planned green growth? “We will need stronger integration of biodiversity values in economic decision-making, compared to where we currently are at, to handle this. And while the policy provides the avenue for this, it may not occur quickly enough. Unless higher understanding and appreciation of eco-

system functioning and services prevail, and is integrated into all segments of development planning, short-term gains may influence decision-making.”

Sharma says everyone should play a part in ensuring that the policy is carried out. “The sustainability of our varied ecosystems, the services they play and goods they provide, is in the interest of all Malaysians. Our decisions today are going to have a profound effect on our future generations. It is really about managing our natural capital.”



1. We now have 42 marine parks but they form only 1.4% of our marine areas. The policy aims to raise the figure to 10% by 2025. — Reefcheck 2. Chiku Cave in Kelantan is earmarked for quarrying despite it having rare plants and an endemic gecko. The new policy on diversity calls for better protection of vulnerable habitats such as limestone hills. — ALI SHAMSUL BAHAR

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